

CHARLES HENRY ROSMAN, FERRYMASTER

By Jill Curtin

August 2019



Charles Henry Rosman
6 April 1898 to 23 May 2004

What does it take to become part of the folklore of a community? My essay focuses on the life and times of Charles Henry Rosman, Ferrymaster and draws upon newspaper articles, oral histories from local residents of the Lane Cove Municipality, court and archival records and also the fond memories of his grandchildren.

If you ever travelled on the Lane Cove River by ferry between 1950 and 1987 it is highly likely you were on a Rosman ferry and if that were the case, it is likely that Charles Rosman was the Skipper.

On 10 November 1950 Sydney Ferries Ltd ceased its ferry service on the Lane Cove River. The residents of Longueville and Northwood, in particular, felt very disappointed. The hourly ferry service had been so much a part of their lives especially for business commuters, school children and women wanting to go to the city to shop. It was a community gathering place where gossip was exchanged, friendships made and even romances that led to marriage began.

Charles Rosman who ran a charter ferry business on Sydney Harbour saw the prospect of taking over the Lane Cove River run as an expansion of his business and so on 13 November 1950 he took the opportunity to commence a peak-hour service which he would continue until 23 May 1987 – a thirty-seven-year journey up and down the river.

Charles was no stranger to Sydney Harbour having obtained his Ferrymaster's ticket in 1916. Salt water coursed through his veins from an early age. His father, Charles Bentham Rosman and his wife Elizabeth, had established a launch hire business in Collies Boatshed, Mosman Bay in 1912 but sadly Charles Snr died young in 1914 and Elizabeth was left to continue the business, which she did until she could hand it over to her two sons, Charles Jnr and his brother James. The 'Regal' and 'Royal' were given to Charles and James became the proprietor of the 'Rex' and 'Regina'. It was a quirky trademark of the business that all the vessels in the fleet had names commencing with the letter 'R'.

Charles obviously had a good eye for business opportunities and in 1916 on obtaining his Navigation & Engineering ticket on his eighteenth birthday, he commenced a ferry service between Balmain, North Sydney and Garden Island. This service continued right throughout World Wars 1 and 2.

One of the extraordinary things about Charles Rosman was his longevity. He died on 23 May 2004 at the age of 106 – exactly 19 years to the day that he had sold his business. He outlived two wives, Clare and Doreen, and very sadly, his only daughter Laurie. Charles was

extremely fond of his grandchildren and step-grandchildren and was generous to them.

They all have happy memories and speak warmly of 'Pa'.

For Charles the 'golden days of ferry travel' as he remembered them, were the days well before the Sydney Harbour Bridge was opened. This was the time when the ferry was king on the harbour. In fact, while the bridge was under construction, he recalled that 56 ferries were operating to service the needs of Sydney commuters. In an interview with Mosman Library Librarian, Nancy Johnson, recorded on 26 June 1996, Charles shared his memories of those days.¹ He was 98 years of age when the recording was made but for the most part his answers are very clear and intelligible. He was quite deaf by then and the occasional non-sequitur in the conversation might have been simply that he did not hear the question. Says Charles, "People just do not have any idea what the harbour was like before they built the bridge. It was like a mad-house with thousands of boats, ships, ferries and punts all trying to avoid each other every day."

Milson's Point was a hub of activity with ferries leaving every six minutes for the city. The trains terminated at Milson's Point and all city commuters had no choice but to catch a ferry. All four ferries that were operated by Sydney Harbour Ferries in Mosman Bay were laden with passengers, every journey. At that stage Charles didn't run a commuter service except the one to Garden Island. Just as he had been doing since 1916 he would pick up dockyard workers from Balmain and North Sydney and deliver them to Garden Island where the Royal Australian Navy has a base. But now some of his passengers were working on the seven-year construction of the Harbour Bridge, so these men he dropped off at Milsons Point. He did the Garden Island journey morning and night for sixty years, and as he said, 'never missed a trip'. On Garden Island the steps at the wharf are known, even today, as the 'Rosman Steps'.

Charles goes on to recall that there were 4,000 men working on Garden Island during World War 2, and an extra shift operated through the night. Only minutes after he returned to Mosman Bay from his evening run on 31 May 1942, he heard the explosion as the torpedo from the Japanese mini-submarine hit the converted ferry "Kuttabal" which was moored at Garden Island and was being used to accommodate sailors. Twenty-one sailors on board

¹ Interview by Nancy Johnson, Librarian Mosman Library 26 June 1996

were killed. The torpedo was meant for the heavy cruiser USS 'Chicago' which was in Sydney Harbour.

As the interview continued, Charles remembered he was on the harbour on 3 November 1927 when the ferry 'Greycliffe' was split in half by the bow of the Union Steamship Company's 7585-ton liner 'Tahiti'. He had commented to a colleague on the speed of the 'Tahiti' moments before the collision took place. That tragedy saw the death of forty passengers. His own ferry was fully laden with workers, but once he had completed the run, he returned to the site of the accident and assisted in the clearing up of the flotsam and jetsam that was left and posed a risk to other craft. Although the Librarian asked an open-ended question about any events that took place on Sydney Harbour that Charles could recall, he makes no mention of the tragedy that affected him so greatly, the sinking of the 'Rodney'.

Charles' days were governed by his regular ferry commuter service, charter runs and the tide. Like all good skippers he insisted on precision and order and generally things ran like clockwork. Sometimes, however, events occur which despite all care, are unforeseen and the consequences are horrendous. As any reader who knows anything of the history of Sydney Harbour will be aware, a ghastly accident occurred in February 1938. It was a tragic event of immense proportions. For Charles, aged forty at the time, it cast a shadow over his life, altering his personality and almost putting him out of business. It became a subject on which he would not comment but which continued to haunt him for the rest of his life. Several newspaper reporters in subsequent years tried to draw him out on the tragedy, only to be rebuffed.

On that fateful day, Sunday 13 February 1938, Charles was the skipper of his new, gleaming 60-foot double-decker launch 'Rodney'. In fact, the 'Rodney' had only been operational for two weeks prior to the accident having gone into service on 27 January 1938. Her Survey Certificate had been issued on 11 February that year by the Maritime Services Board.² She had been built to order of Mr Rosman by W L Holmes & Co. and was 60 feet long, with a beam of 15 feet; thirty-one-ton weight with a draught of approximately 5 feet 4 inches. She was registered to carry 211 passengers - 151 on the main deck and 60 on the upper deck plus a crew of two.

² Coroner's Inquest Papers (pages not numbered)

The day dawned bright that Sunday. Sydney Harbour was alive with activity as the United States Northampton-class cruiser 'Louisville' was leaving Sydney after a joyful, goodwill eighteen-day visit celebrating the sesquicentenary of the arrival of the First Fleet. During her time in port, many of the sailors had enjoyed a good time in town and met pretty young women who were very sad to see them leaving. To place the visit of the ship into an historical context, the real possibility of a second world war fermented in Europe and there were widespread feelings of anxiety. The United States represented strength and stability, and in time that country would be called upon to defend Australia from the Japanese. The 600 American sailors, all in spotless white uniforms, looked handsome and well drilled as they lined the decks and the ship they crewed was strong and mighty. Sydney Harbour sparkled with sunlight dancing on the gentle waves, and many small craft decorated in red, white and blue bunting and star-spangled banners, were happily bobbing along. The Police Band was playing on the Police launch 'Cumbria' anchored off Bradley's Head and spirits were high. It was no wonder so many people were on the harbour to enjoy the spectacle. Although the 'Rodney' was licensed to carry 211 passengers there were only 120 on board. As the 'Louisville' reached Bradley's Head the paraded sailors were dismissed. In order that his passengers could get a better view, Charles had the 'Rodney' change course passing around the stern of the cruiser. In this new position, the mostly young female passengers on the top deck rushed from port to starboard, perhaps to gain sight of and wave to a particular sailor they had met ashore in the last few days, and the sudden shift in weight, it is believed, caused the launch to list. It is possible the ferry was then hit by wash from another vessel.

"Everyone rushed across to the left rail ... as the boat started to tip. The next moment we were going over" reported Jean Larson of Balmain, sister of Violet who drowned.³

The 'Rodney' lurched to starboard, then suddenly turned upside down and started to sink into the deep water three hundred yards south east of Bradley's Head. What followed was a scene of pandemonium, chaos and disaster. Immediately there were four horn blasts – the universal emergency signal - from a nearby ferry.

Several of the young American sailors, without hesitation, dived in to try to save passengers who were clinging to the hull of the sinking vessel. The 'Louisville' hove-to and lifebelts

³ Coroner's Inquest papers

were dropped immediately, followed by the lowering of her two motor boats and four whalers in an effort to rescue the stricken passengers of the 'Rodney'. Charles himself desperately tried to save his passengers. Despite these efforts and those of other boat owners in the immediately vicinity, nineteen lives were lost that day. It was a tragedy of enormous proportions for Sydney. Twelve of the victims were young single women, four others were married women, two were children and one other, a married man. The victims were mainly passengers who were trapped on the lower deck.

Twenty-six passengers were taken on board the 'Louisville' where they were treated by the ship's doctor using the ship's oxygen respirators.

The Inquest into the sinking of the 'Rodney' was conducted by the City Coroner, Mr E T Oram on 9 and 10 March 1938. It is the responsibility of the Coroner to establish when, where, how and by what means the deceased came to their deaths.⁴

Having made such inquiries, the Coroner declared and found, "that the deceased on 13 February 1938 in the waters of Port Jackson near Bradley's Head in the District of Sydney in the said State, died of asphyxia from drowning accidentally caused by the Motor Vessel 'Rodney' on which they were then passengers, overturning and throwing them into the said waters at the same place on the same day."⁵

The Inquest documents held in the State Archives of New South Wales include sworn statements from those people who were charged with identifying their deceased relative or friend and also statements from witnesses – first-hand accounts of the accident as it unfolded before their eyes. Some of the witnesses were fellow passengers on the 'Rodney' while others were on nearby boats. The statements make distressing reading.

For the most part, those people who identified a deceased person gave simple statements merely stating the name, age, trade or profession and domicile of their relative or friend.

Two of the deceased were former residents of our Municipality of Lane Cove. ⁶ Alfred Augustus Stepto and his sixteen-year-old daughter, Eileen May Stepto drowned that day. Gertrude May Stepto, wife of Alfred survived, although she did require resuscitation which she recalls in her statement. Fortunately, their ten-year-old son was among the rescued.

⁴ Coroner's Inquest papers

⁵ Idem

⁶ Coroner's Inquest papers

They had been renting a property – 18 Ford Street Greenwich, while Alfred was employed as a foreman at Shell Co of Australia Ltd which still operates in Greenwich.

As a matter of historical interest, one of the young women who drowned was Gwendoline Frances Johnston of Waverley. Miss Johnston was a direct descendant of Lieutenant Johnston who was aide-de-camp to Captain Arthur Phillip whose arrival in Sydney Harbour in 1788 with the First Fleet, the USS 'Louisville' had been celebrating. Such a poignant coincidence. (Annexure A)

The witness statements included with the court documents illustrate the confusion which often arises after an accident. There are many versions of the events of that day. Some of the passengers on the 'Rodney' were not regular ferry commuters and may have found the normal motion of a ferry unfamiliar or even frightening. As there were so many small craft on the harbour, it is likely the ferry was often in the wake of passing vessels and the water can become churned up.

The 'Rodney' had picked up its passengers from a wharf at Woolloomooloo. The deckhand, Mr Norman Callaghan, who had worked on the 'Rodney' from the time she was commissioned, and had been an employee of Charles Rosman's for some 10 or 11 years, was standing on the wharf spruiking for passengers. For 1/- (one shilling) return, you could have a trip on the harbour on this sparkling day and see the US Cruiser 'Louisville' leave Sydney. For many passers-by that day the temptation to join in the festivities was too great to miss. Particularly for the many young women who had met the sailors while they were in Sydney, the trip provided one last chance to farewell their new friends.

Mr Callaghan stated that as they left the wharf there were about 18 people on the lower deck and about 70 - 80 passengers on the top deck. He was aware of the maximum allowed, being 60. Acting on instructions from Mr Rosman, he asked people to move off the deck to the lower deck. He told the passengers that there were too many on the top deck and some would need to go below or risk a fine. Some went below, about 18 to 20, but others just laughed and said, "don't be silly".⁷

When the ferry was between Garden Island and Bradley's Head, the Master of the ferry, Mr Rosman, asked him to get people down again. Mr Callaghan noticed that a few went down, but more came up then. About 8 – 10 went to the lower forward deck. Mr Callaghan also

⁷ Coroner's Inquest papers

states importantly, that he didn't notice any list or any water washing under the doors and over the deck. "If I had I would have reported it at once." He did notice that the people who had previously been on the forward lower deck were no longer there, so he decided to go up and get more down. He was just about to go up to the top deck when the launch lurched and turned over. He was thrown over the port side into the water. When he came up again he noticed the propeller going around and there were a few people clambering around it. He sang out, "Keep away from the propeller."

Mr Callaghan's evidence is important because he was familiar with the vessel. He states, "I didn't notice any unusual list at any time up to the time of the capsizing. There is always a rocking from side to side when in a wash ... we may have passed a ferry. It was a very calm day. I can't suggest any explanation for the capsizing."⁸

Mr Callaghan also refers specifically to one of the exhibits presented to the Inquest to support the claim the ferry was over-crowded on the top deck. He claims the photograph (Annexure B) was taken shortly after the boat left the wharf, not just prior to the accident. The evidence provided by Mr Rosman himself to the Coroner acknowledges the ferry had a list to starboard right from the start of the journey. Later, as the ferry slowly circled the ship, the ferry was listing to port. "I didn't regard the list to port as a dangerous list ... that was caused by the passengers all getting on to the port side of the boat because that was the nearer to the ship." He recalls asking the deckhand to ask people not to stand on the top deck seats and try to keep them from moving about. "I heard him ask them ... and for some of them to go down below... I am quite sure of that." He went on to relate that the deck-hand told me he had been able to get 8 or 10 passengers down off the roof and off the seats, but some people had point blank refused to get off the seats and he asked me what he could do. I suggested he try to get others down to make up for them. I personally spoke out of the wheelhouse to some on the roof of the wheelhouse ... would they get down? They got down with the help of another man there but a few minutes later they were on the top again."⁹

Mr Rosman continues his evidence: "Just prior to that we were running to the starboard side of the 'Louisville' and gradually listing to port."

⁸ Coroner's Inquest papers

⁹ Coroner's Inquest papers

“I then crossed the wash of the ‘Louisville’ which was taking a circular course around Bradley’s Head, with my boat to head her off. The ‘Louisville’ appeared to slow down at that period and we rapidly overhauled her. About 100 yards past Bradley’s Head I was approximately midships of the ‘Louisville’ running approximately parallel to her. I continued in that parallel course for about 100 yards. There was a sudden rush to the side of the people on the top deck and almost immediately she capsized to starboard and was lower in the water at the bow than the stern.”

“I was not the only person in the wheelhouse until the capsize. Mr Stepto, an ex-naval man, was standing in the doorway of the wheelhouse. I was standing at the wheel. At the moment the boat capsized Mr Stepto, was thrown into the wheelhouse”. Mr Rosman believes Mr Stepto may have been knocked unconscious in the fall and that was why he drowned.

The ‘Rodney’ was a new craft and Mr Rosman concedes, “My experience of the launch was limited in time ... I had had her 17 days.”

Under closer questioning by the Coroner Mr Rosman states, “(Mr Callaghan) thought the number on the upper deck was about right when he moved those off.”

In defence of the vessel, Mr Rosman states, “I understood that if I only had 60 I could put them all on the upper deck. The upper deck is licensed for 60 and I think I could put them up there even if there was no one on the lower deck. She was tested for stability on that basis. She didn’t exactly exhibit a tenderness. It was a list. Ten degrees one way and then 15 degrees the other way was not a tenderness. The people were distributed. Some were sitting down. It was not a dangerous list. The Board’s (Maritime Services Board) surveyor told me there was a 60% margin of safety.”¹⁰

Mr Rosman also answered questions concerning the bilge pumps and also ballast tanks. Nothing appeared to be out of order.

An important witness was James Mackay, a Water Policeman of seven years’ experience and who held a coxswain and driver’s certificate. He was on duty and aboard the police launch ‘Osiris’ that day. He states in evidence: “The whole manoeuvre of the ‘Rodney’ at the time appeared to be a safe one. It did not appear to me that she had got too close to the

¹⁰ Idem

cruiser.” He also states: “I noticed the crowd on the upper deck making a race toward the starboard side of the launch, which almost immediately afterwards capsized.”¹¹

On the police launch ‘Cambria’ that day was Police Constable Robert Steele. His statement reads: “She was on an even keel and I noticed there were a number of people on the top deck of the Rodney She had a list I wouldn’t say dangerous...”¹²

Mr Albert Brew, Sea Pilot of Sydney Harbour was on the USS ‘Louisville’ to take her to sea. His was a very responsible job. He reports a conversation he had with Captain R W Mathewson of the ‘Louisville’ who drew his attention to the ‘Rodney’ thus: “There are too many people on that ferry... any wash from this ship will capsize that launch”. He directed Mr Brew to ensure that the 10 knot speed of the ‘Louisville’ be reduced to 5 knots.

Lieutenant Menocal of the ‘Louisville’ gave evidence at the Inquest to the effect: “There were very few people on the lower deck and the upper deck was crowded, everyone on the ferry boat being on the starboard side. The ferry boat was already dangerously listed...The ferry turned to port gradually listing more and more.” “Watch that ferry boat! She is going to turn over”, were his last words of warning before the boat capsized before his eyes. In his evidence, he stated that he did not believe the ‘Rodney’ had been hit by the wake of the ‘Louisville’.¹³

The ‘Rodney’ was about 600 feet abaft of the beam of the ‘Louisville’ when she capsized at 2.25 p.m. on that fateful day.

Although an immediate effort was made to raise the ‘Rodney’ it wasn’t until a few days later that that was achieved and bodies recovered from the sunken vessel. Some bodies were found floating elsewhere in the harbour, badly decomposed, five days after the capsize.

The City Coroner returned a finding of accidental deaths. He absolved Mr Rosman of criminal neglect.¹⁴

The Court of Marine Inquiry commenced its hearing before Judge Markell on 21 March 1938. Legal Counsel represented Mr Charles Rosman. There was also legal representation for the Maritime Services Board and another for the Merchant Service Guild of Australia.

¹¹ Coroner’s Inquest papers

¹² Idem

¹³ Idem

¹⁴ Idem

After several days of hearing, including extensive cross-examination of Mr Rosman, Mr Callaghan and witnesses, very similar evidence as that which had been presented at the Inquest was considered. The Court ultimately found “that the capsizing of the vessel was due to the neglect of the master, Charles Henry Rosman, in permitting an excessive number of passengers to be on the upper deck of the vessel immediately before the latter capsized.”¹⁵

Mr Rosman had admitted in evidence that his estimate of how many people were on the top deck ‘was badly out’ as revealed by the photograph submitted in evidence. This photograph, however, was the one the deckhand claimed was taken on leaving the wharf, not just prior to the accident. (Annexure B).

The final Judgement was handed down on 16th May, 1938. It read as follows -

“The decision of the court is that Mr Rosman’s certificate as master of a harbour and river steamer be suspended for a period of three years from the 15th February 1938. His license as a driver of a motor boat is to be returned to him.”¹⁶

“The court wishes to place on record its appreciation of the timely assistance rendered by the Commander, officers and ratings of the U.S.S. Cruiser ‘Louisville’. Had it not been for the efficiency and courage displayed by them, the loss of life would undoubtedly have been much greater.”

Subsequently, the Prime Minister, Mr J. A. Lyons sent a letter of appreciation to the Consul-General for the United States of America.¹⁷ The letter also notes that the Premier of New South Wales has requested that Silver Medals and Certificates of Merit be presented to seven of the crew, individually named, to acknowledge their brave actions. (Annexure C)

As a consequence of the accident, an official of the Maritime Services Board advocated the abolition of top decks on craft like the ‘Rodney’.

There was a recommendation by the Judge of the Court of Marine Inquiry that, “In view of the evidence given by experts to the effect that in the case of small passenger carrying vessels of the type to which the ‘Rodney’ belongs, on account of the relatively large ratio which the live weight as represented by passengers bears to the displacement, considerable danger exists in the event of all the passengers moving to one side, the court expresses the

¹⁵ Transcript of the Marine Inquiry re the ‘Rodney’, 1938

¹⁶ Idem

¹⁷ Special Bundles (Premier’s Department) 1906-1976

opinion that before issuing certificates to vessels of this class every precaution should be taken to prevent accidents of such a kind occurring that regulations be framed accordingly if necessary.... If practicable the vessel be tested under circumstances representing the number of passengers allowed by a certificate on a given deck, all moving to one side.”¹⁸

These recommendations together with the relatively light penalty imposed on Mr Rosman, tend to vindicate him and ascribe some blame to the inadequate regulations that were current when the ‘Rodney’ was registered.

The sequelae of this terrible accident hung like the ‘Sword of Damocles’ over Charles’ head. For many years after the event, on the anniversary of the accident Charles received anonymous phone calls of abuse at his home, accusing him of the most heinous crimes. For many people, there would be no coming back from such an accident.

The ‘Rodney’ which was insured by Lloyds of London was re-floated and her name changed to ‘Regis’ then later to ‘Regalia’. Charles had the boat surveyed and maintained the original design was poor and that there was not enough ballast in her to stabilise the upper deck. He wanted to pursue the boat builder for negligence, but the insurer would not proceed with the claim. Charles would never willingly talk about the accident. He had been traumatised by the event. His way of coping was to get on with what he had always done – skippering his boats from dawn to dusk.

The ‘Radar’, probably the best-known launch in the fleet, was built in 1947 by Australian Shipbuilding Industries in Berry’s Bay (Annexure D). She was a fine-looking vessel, ‘streamlined’ with a ‘modern motor ship funnel’. At 60-feet long she was licensed to carry 250 passengers. All Rosman ferries were timber and painted red and cream. The ferry boats you see on the harbour today with that Federation livery, were originally Rosman ferries. Of all his craft, the ‘Radar’ was perhaps his favourite. In the interview recorded by Nancy Johnson at Mosman Library¹⁹, Charles spoke nostalgically of the special teak timber which lined her deck which was from the original HMAS ‘Adelaide’ after that ship was decommissioned, broken up and sold. To this day ‘Radar’ still has her original engine. His affection for this vessel was quite apparent. Rather surprisingly, a step granddaughter was

¹⁸ Court of Marine Inquiry

¹⁹ Interview by Nancy Johnson, 26 June 1996

even named in her honour. Radar, the step granddaughter, fortunately, is very proud of her name.

The Lane Cove River commuter service wasn't particularly lucrative, despite being a reliable and constant source of revenue. It was the daily cruise business that provided the best returns. And, without doubt, it was the summer Saturday afternoon cruise that was Charles' favourite time despite, as he said, "it was the hardest work we do, following a harbour race"²⁰. This is hardly surprising when you consider there were approximately 1500 pleasure craft on the harbour at that time.

The 18 Foot Skiff races are an institution on Sydney Harbour throughout summer. The Sydney Flying Squadron Yacht Club organises races on the Harbour. Each Saturday this spectacular event is watched by hundreds of people who enjoy the thrill and excitement of seeing the fastest class of sailing skiffs racing across the Harbour. It is a glorious sight to see the boats with their colourful spinnakers, which when inflated by the wind look like enormous half balloons in psychedelic colours, pulling the boat through the water. Then suddenly, almost without warning, the boats turn swiftly at marker buoys and chase each other down the harbour to the finish line.

The 18-foot skiffs are high-performance boats but it takes agility and skill to sail them. It also takes skill and agility on the part of a ferry skipper to keep up with the race, but at the same time keep a sufficient distance away so as not to interfere with the race and avoid any collision. Power must give way to sail.

'The 18 foot People', those who regularly follow the race have themselves become something of a legend on the harbour over the years. A delightful documentary video of that name, 'The 18 foot People', was written and directed by William Fitzwater in 1983.²¹ It captures the personalities of people who have followed the race, some, amazingly, for as long as sixty years.

"Ladies, larrikins, businessmen and bludgers, bookies and punters, they all flocked to gamble and gape at the reckless and the bold." (William Fitzwater)²²

Yes, bookies were aboard the ferry so the patrons could place a bet almost right up until the finish of the race. The spectator ferries were periodically raided by the Gaming Squad on

²⁰ Interview Nancy Johnson, 26 June 1996

²¹ Video "18 Foot People" by William Fitzwater, 1983

²² Video, Wm Fitzwater

suspicion of harbouring illegal gambling activities. Charles was something of a gambler himself but his preference was the horses, even placing a bet the week before he died. He always bet for a win, not just a place and he was a good punter.

Weddings, 21st birthdays, Christmas and New Year's Eve parties and just about every other celebration you could name were held aboard Rosman Ferries. In the 1970's the Radar became the first ferry on the harbour to have a liquor licence. One of Charles' step granddaughters became a caterer and established a good business catering for the functions held on the boats. It irritated Charles that she made more money doing the catering than he did hiring the vessel. The harbour cruises proved to be very popular with the American servicemen on Rest & Recreation leave from the Vietnam war.

Hiring his boats out for cruises was a good source of income for Charles. He never missed an opportunity to make the most of events that were scheduled to take place around the harbour, such as the visit to Sydney by Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip in February 1954. Charles leased four extra ferries from Woy Woy which were brought down to Sydney so that he could conduct extra cruises, which he did. My very first trip on a Rosman ferry was at that time. A group of Lane Cove mothers got together and hired a Rosman ferry to welcome the arrival of the newly crowned young Queen Elizabeth and her husband, the handsome Prince Philip aboard the 'SS Gothic' a former cargo liner, on 3 February 1954.

Unfortunately, the Royal Yacht 'Britannia' was not yet ready for the long trip. I was only a child of four years but I still have recollections of the excitement of that day on the harbour. On 6 April 1998 Charles had another brush with royalty when he received a letter from the Queen congratulating him on his centenary and every two years subsequently, a further letter, up to and including his 106th birthday.

The Rosman Ferries are still afloat on Sydney Harbour and still bear the name of the former skipper above the cabin door. Unlike the modern, slick, low profiled, aluminium catamarans ferries, the painted timber Rosman boats with their rather squat appearance look like they have been lifted straight out of the pages of a children's story book. There is something very old fashioned and charming about them and inside the vessels too there is a feeling of homeliness and security. Mrs Anne Jack, a former commuter whom I interviewed, laughed when she remembered that all the 'regulars' had their own seats – not allocated of course, it was just that the travellers found a spot that suited them and that was where they gravitated to henceforth. If someone unfamiliar with this routine inadvertently sat in the

spot favoured by a regular, there would be much rather obvious displays of shuffling up along the seats and mumbled grumblings of inconvenience to accommodate the newcomer – even if there was plenty of room!

None of the crew of the Rosman ferries wore uniforms. Charles, himself, was usually seen wearing a comfortable old sleeveless vest with several pockets. He liked to collect the fares, leaving his deck-hand to steer the boat. Charles made his way around the boat – fresh tickets in one pocket, coins in another and paper money in a third pocket. The ticketing system was quaint. A soft cardboard ticket, printed with a grid design of ten small squares, could be purchased and covered ten trips. Charles would tear a little slit in the ticket to coincide with tiny squares marked on the ticket. Occasionally he carried a small device like a hole-punch but more often than not he simply tore the ticket manually.

For many residents of Greenwich, Northwood, Longueville, Riverview and Hunter's Hill it was a sad day when Charles Rosman gave up his skipper's license and sold his business. He was 89 and had been skippering for 71 years. He didn't go with a whimper though. Many of the regular commuters thought it appropriate that a party be held to celebrate the retirement of one of the great ferrymen of Sydney Harbour. The party, aboard a ferry of course, the 'Royal', was held on 13 May 1987. The vessel navigated familiar waters up the Lane Cove River – a passage Charles would have known with his eyes closed. Every bend in the river, which shallows to be avoided and possible wind gusts to expect that could alter the direction, were imprinted on his brain.

I have interviewed a number of those regular commuters to see what memories they have of their trips along the Lane Cove River and of the skipper on whose boat they were travelling.²³ One thing just about everyone agreed on was that Charlie had a taciturn nature. He wasn't a social being, he didn't engage in small talk. When one of the passengers commented that this was just about his last ferry trip, he simply responded, "fares please"! Perhaps it was his deafness again, but given his nature it wouldn't be surprising if he just didn't want to comment.

That Charles was reliable, stoic, dependable and fearless was never in dispute and the stories I was told generally illustrate his true nature. Just as Charles prided himself that he never missed a scheduled trip on his Garden Island service in sixty years, so was he never to

²³ Oral histories from regular commuters on Rosman Ferries

miss a Lane Cove River run because of something as insignificant as a 'pea-souper' fog even when all other vessels on the harbour had halted until the fog lifted. A long-term resident of Longueville and a senior member of the Judiciary who was a regular commuter, recalls that "on one occasion I was on board when we found ourselves near the Iron Cove Bridge. On another occasion we hit Cockatoo Island, but not too hard!" Perhaps we should forgive a little hyperbole in the interests of a good story! There are apocryphal stories of some of the passengers huddled together on the top deck staring into the thick, impenetrable fog singing "Nearer My God to Thee", as the bow of the ferry nudged forward uncertainly through the water with Charles at the wheel guided more by instinct than anything else. On mornings when foghorns could be heard around the harbour, the ever-reliable 'Radar' suddenly was seen emerging out of the murky miasma like a ghost ship, to pick up passengers at Longueville wharf. Former travellers told me they only knew they were heading in the right direction when they could hear cars going over the Harbour Bridge. There was a little bit of wickedness and 'working class boy' in Charles. Being a man who thrived on hard work, punctuality and his timetable, he grew irritated by the tardy attitude he observed in some of his passengers. The same latecomers, day after day would test his patience, until one day he could take no more and left the stunned recidivists standing on the wharf in disbelief, after the ferry left the Hunter's Hill wharf at the scheduled time of 8.00 a.m. "If I'm prepared to get there on time, then they should be prepared to meet the ferry on time. They don't think of the people who have to catch trains and buses at the other end. The ferry service is not just for them – 150 people travel on the 8 a.m. run".²⁴ It's good to let off steam occasionally.

Undoubtedly travelling by ferry was a pleasurable way to get to and from work. One group of regulars would indulge themselves each evening by opening a can or two on the trip home. Mr Maitland Wheeler, formerly of Northwood, says the group was known affectionately as 'the Two-Can Club' (or alternatively the 'Two Can Trip' because the journey home was only long enough for the consumption of two cans of beer). They would stand out on the forward deck, enjoy a drink, have a yarn and admire the sunset as they glided along the harbour and then into the river towards their home wharf.

²⁴ 'The Day the Ferryman Rebelled', Leigh Bottrell

Eventually age and a fog caught up with Charles. Even his thorough knowledge of the harbour didn't prevent a minor accident occurring on a foggy morning before 7 a.m. On July 15, 1986 while skippering the 'Royal' he collided with Many ferry, 'Queenscliff' near Garden Island. (reported in 'The Sun', 15 July 1986)²⁵. It was this accident that stripped him of his licence. Now it was time to call it a day for Charles as Skipper and Commander of his fleet. 'Straight-line Charlie' as he was affectionately known by other ferry skippers who plied the harbour, had at last changed course, but this time permanently, into retirement. Despite his dedication to work, throughout his working career occasionally Charles did take a holiday and this was family time. His ferry business was making a good profit by the 1960's so Charles started to treat himself to a few of life's pleasures. Always an admirer of the Jaguar car, Charles owned a series of them and he liked to take his family on long trips all over Australia. When age and deteriorating health forced him off the road, he took up cruising, always on Royal Viking ships – again with members of his family by his side and in total he enjoyed ten cruises. "And I'm always invited up onto the bridge!"

Eldest granddaughter, Lesley, travelled to Alaska with Charles in 1998. Once they arrived at Sydney Airport, like everyone else they handed over their passports to check-in, but after a few moments Lesley was recalled to the desk. An anxious Qantas employee feared a mistake had been made in Charles' passport, "It states his year of birth as 1898?" "Yes", replied Lesley calmly, "my grandfather is 100 years old!" And off they went to Alaska.

Charles died on 23 May 2004. His death notice reads: -

"Legend on Sydney Harbour for 74 years".

And indeed he was.

²⁵ 'The Sun' newspaper 15 July 1986

REFERENCES

1. Interview (cassette tape) by Nancy Johnson, Librarian Mosman Library of Charles Rosman recorded on 26 June 1996. (footnotes 1 and 19).
2. Coroner's Inquest papers, 1851-1963; NRS 345; 434/1938 (2/10539) Sinking of 'Rodney' on Sydney Harbour, 13 February 1938.
(Footnotes 2 – 14.)
3. Transcripts of Evidence of various courts and Royal Commissions & Boards of Inquiry 1899 - NRS 2713; (6/2014) Transcript of the Marine Inquiry re the 'Rodney' 1938.
(Footnotes 15, 16)
4. Letters received – special bundles (Premier's Department) 1906-1976; NRS 12061; 838/459 (9/3831.1). Inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the capsizing of the British motor-ship 'Rodney' near Bradley's Head on 13 February 1938. (Footnote 17)
5. Video "18 Foot People", written and directed by William Fitzwater, 1983.
(Footnote 21,22)
6. Oral Histories from: Mr W Windeyer, Mrs Anne Jack, Mr Maitland Wheeler and others March, 2019. (Footnote 23)
7. "The Day the Ferryman Rebelled" by Leigh Bottrell, 'The Daily Telegraph, 1 April, 1980. (Footnote 24)
8. 'The Sun' newspaper, 15 July 1986

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This essay contains material provided to me by Charles Rosman's grandchildren, but never made available to the many journalists who wrote newspaper and magazines articles about him. They shared with me stories of their Pa. Special mention should be made of Clare, Charles' first wife, and later Doreen (Dot), whom he married in 1958 after Clare died. Both women worked tirelessly behind the scenes and contributed to the success of the Rosman Ferry business. As a home run enterprise, Charles left it to his wife to run the office and ensure the smooth running of the ferry service.

Word count: 6999

GIRL VICTIM.

Descendant of Pioneer.

Gwendoline Frances Hope Johnston, of View Street, Waverley, who was drowned, was only 20 years of age. She and a friend, Mr. J. Pritchard, of Tacapuraree Avenue, Vacluse, were aboard the Rodney. They were waving

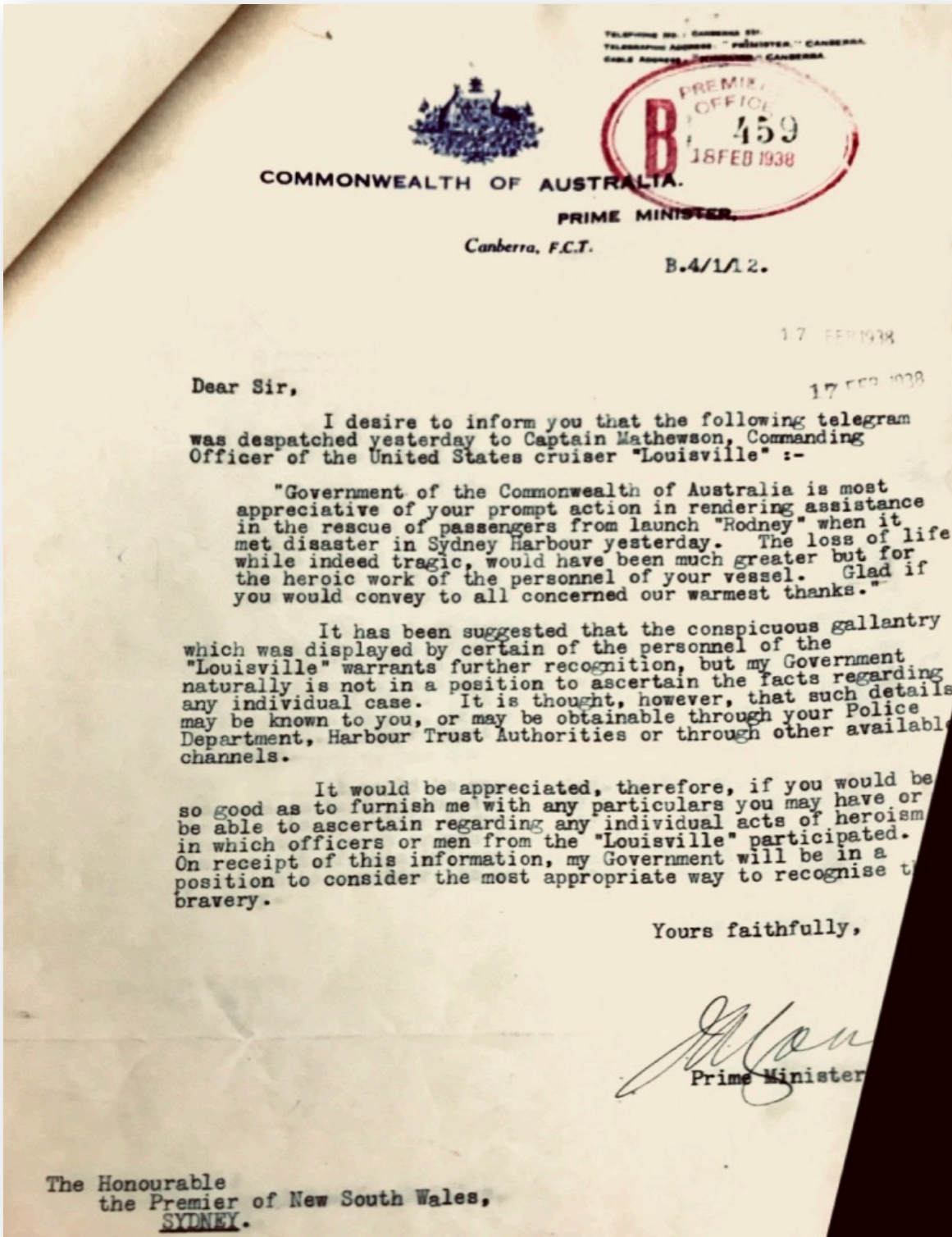


farewell to several officers of the Louisville whom they had entertained. Miss Johnston was a direct descendant of Lieutenant Johnston, who was aide-de-camp to Captain Phillip. Mr. Pritchard was hauled aboard the yacht of Mr. A. Blackwood, of Bellevue Hill, who is a friend of the family.

ANNEXURE B



ANNEXURE C



ANNEXURE D

RADAR - 1947



Length : 20 Metres
Cocktails & Sightseeing - 150 passengers
Ferry Transport - 230 passengers
Double Deck Vessel
Open Front & Rear Decks
Large Servery Area
BYO Alcohol Possible
Rich Varnished timberwork

Radar was built immediately after World War 2, and is the current senior member of the Rosman fleet.

